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ABSTRACT

In this speech, the president of the National Education Association presents a series of arguments against the development of national educational standards and against the continued use of national, norm-referenced, standardized tests. Eight objections to the use of such tests are noted. Defense of the teaching profession's objections to the tests is based upon the fact that (while such tests provide much more security for the teacher than do criterion-referenced tests and parent-teacher-student conferences) they are simplistic in their measurement, nearly impossible for the layman or local teacher to interpret, and label half the test-takers as losers. In opposition to standardized testing, it is recommended that evaluation be performed in a variety of ways: observation of the student and his academic and personal growth by behavior, motivational patterns, independent work habits, presentations, parent-teacher conferences, individual diagnostic tests, teacher-made tests, school letter grades, and the development of criterion-referenced tests. A role for the federal government is suggested as being financial support and encouragement of the development of tests for assessing the performance of groups and tests for assessing the performance of individuals. Continuation of support for the National Assessment of Educational Progress is also urged. The speaker concludes with the observation that norm-referenced, standardized tests make a lie of education's often-stated concern for individual differences. (MJB)

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Supplement to Monitor Release #21, March 17, 1978, from the Instruction and Professional Development staff, National Education Association, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N. W., Washington, DC 20036.

NEA President John Ryor spoke to the National Conference on Achievement Testing and Basic Skills in Washington, DC, on March 2. His presentation on "Teachers and Achievement Testing" follows.

* * *

Today we are witnessing a disturbing trend in our schools. For an increasing number of students, schools are the only institution trying to provide an orderly process for socialization and maturation. Most of society's problems, as they are reflected in the children, are being dumped on the schools. As a result, teachers and schools are at the center, not by choice, not by decision, but by default. In many places, the public schools have become society's last alternative to abandoning its children to the streets. If the family is unable to deal or is incapable of dealing with its own children, then those problems come to school. If the teacher cannot deal with them successfully, the teacher is to blame. The situation is increasingly difficult for the teacher and potentially disastrous for our society.

We are placed in a situation similar to that of the student who is asked to come for an appointment with his counselor: if he's early for the meeting, he's considered anxious about the meeting; if he's late, he's said to be resistant; and if he's on time, then he finds himself labeled compulsive.

Teachers all over this country are finding the phenomenon of personally directed criticism increasingly frustrating. If you want smaller classes, you're accused of goldbricking. If you develop an innovative program, you squander school funds. If you repeat lessons yearly, you're archaic and have gone to seed. If you tighten class control, you're hostile. If you run a relaxed class, you're permissive. If you use the deductive demonstration method of teaching, you, not the student, are the center of learning. If you use the inductive discovery method, then the student is doing all the work and you're lazy. If you don't like standardized tests, it's only because you're afraid of being evaluated.

Societal ambivalence over national standards vs. national standardized testing is an example of the value confusion which leads to that frustration. Parents almost universally reject the notion of a national curriculum but at the same time seem to embrace national standardized tests without ever understanding the relationship between the two.

Terry Herndon pointed out in a recent article, "There is no point to national standards which aren't pursued; and if they are to be pursued, then they're goals and not mere standards."

It's a valid point. It certainly gives rise to more serious questions about the potential for a national curriculum and, if there's going to be a national mandate, who should set those goals. It seems to me those questions ought to be answered before we ever start devising a test.

There are those who believe that the best interest of education in the United States would be served by a set of national standards. I'm not one of those.

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But if it's to happen, it seems to me it would be saner to decide first what we wanted as a uniform curriculum for survival and progress and then build the tests to measure the individual's progress toward our goals. Standardized evaluations of education in the U.S. make no more sense than insisting that education in Pt. Barrow, Alaska, ought to be identical to education in White Plains, New York, and then--if test results on a norm-referenced test taken in Pt. Barrow do not match up with White Plains--concluding there must be something deficient about one school district or the other.

Many of our frustrations and the frustrations of our students emanate from our efforts to make sameness out of that which is essentially and inherently different--children and the way they learn. Trying to reconcile the difference between what we say we want to teach children and what we really teach children, and evaluating all that as inexpensively as possible, has led us to our ambivalence.

It's been no secret that since 1971 the NEA has asked for a moratorium on standardized testing. Our reasons for requesting a national hiatus on the use of those tests, from my view, have always been relatively straightforward:

1. They don't do what they purport to do.
2. They tend to be culturally biased.
3. They are norm-referenced; they cannot help but label half the students losers.
4. They seldom correspond, to any significant degree, to local learning objectives. (Related to that, arithmetic reliability is more important than content validity in the construction of those tests.)
5. They're useless in measuring growth over a short period of time.
6. There's a tendency on the part of schools to misuse tests and to jump to unwarranted changes in curriculum.
7. And finally, some school systems tend to use the results to justify plans for tracking students (railroading might be a better term) into educational and career decisions.

Other than that, we have no objections to the tests.

Now, it seems to me that those are very important observations, but the fact is those questions aren't being dealt with. Even more disturbing is the fact that, as teachers, we're criticized every time we try to improve the schools and at every corner we're accused of self-serving motives. When we raise some very important and fundamental objections to such things as standardized tests, our objections are not answered; rather, our motives are challenged. We're accused of wanting least that which we want most: the support and involvement of the public in public schools.

We've all heard the charge that teacher opposition to standardized testing is self-serving because teachers don't want to be evaluated. That is a specious and outrageous argument, particularly when one understands that maintaining an evaluation model based on nationally norm-referenced tests would be the easiest of all worlds for the teacher. After all, there is great comfort in anonymity, and that's precisely what standardized tests provide--anonymity. Inasmuch as the nature of the tests presumes that our 16,000 school districts have the same curriculum, that's a fallacy. Therefore, the results of such a test are always and in all ways questionable. Hence, all the arguments to the contrary, it's my belief that there is much more safety for the teacher and the education system in norm-referenced standardized testing than in criterion-referenced tests or in parent-teacher-student conferences. The truth is, teacher concern for student learning is the basis for NEA's demand for the more meaningful ways to evaluate students.

Our Task Force on Testing, after three years of intensive study, concluded that "the major use of tests should be to improve instruction--to diagnose learning difficulties and to plan activities in response to learning needs. Tests must not be used in any way to label and classify students, to track students into homogeneous groups, to determine educational programs, to perpetuate an elitism, or to maintain some groups and individuals 'in their place' near the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. In short, tests must not be used in ways that will deny any student full access to equal educational opportunity."

The question is, what do we do as interested and involved leaders when opinion makers suggest that teachers aren't what they used to be, when they suggest the real problems confronting our society can be cured by returning to the basics? Basics has become the buzz word of the 70's--like the Ivory soap ad where the young lady says that her commitment to the basics (Ivory, in this case) is the thing which maintains her youthfulness and, by implication, causes her love life to soar--conjuring up for the viewing audience visions of ecstasy if only we'd wash our grubby faces with Ivory.

Where do we go when we're caught up in a world dominated by opinion makers who, contrary to the evidence, would have us believe that scrubbing our children's minds with the basics will cause society to be 99 44/100 pure of what ails it. The resolution rests with all of us and with our ability to consolidate and responsibly use teacher/parent and society strength in the resolution of the problem.

There's a dynamic of human life which holds a very simple lesson for all of us as leaders: we either shape the circumstances affecting our lives or we spend our time reacting to others who jerk the circumstances around to fit their own needs. You don't need to be an economist to see that teacher salaries take a smaller percentage of the school dollar than they did 10 years ago, or to see that in that same period of time educational consultant positions and teacher aide positions have increased 180%, or that teachers are increasingly being put upon to solve social problems which were traditionally the province of other institutions in our society. Furthermore, you don't need to be an expert in testing to view with alarm the proliferation of assessment instruments which are incapable of measuring a school's progress, much less that of a student.

Oscar K. Buros, editor of The Mental Measurements Yearbook, expressed his concerns about testing in a lecture presented at the University of Iowa in March 1977. He said, "I consider that 'most standardized tests are poorly constructed, of questionable or unknown validity, pretensions in their claims, and likely to be misused more often than not.' ...we have allowed normed scores to serve as an effective barrier between test users and the achievement of students. Norms enable us to make certain interpretations of tests results. Unfortunately, they also make it difficult or impossible to interpret raw scores." Buros continued by saying, "I would like to repeat a statement which I made forty-two years ago:

"Today it is practically impossible for a competent test technician or test consumer to make a thorough appraisal of the construction, validation, and use of most standardized tests being published because of the limited amount of trustworthy information supplied by test publishers and authors....If testing is to be of maximum value to schools, test authors and publishers must give more adequate information.... It would be advantageous ... if test publishers would construct only one-fourth to one half as many tests ...and use the time saved for presenting the detailed information needed by test consumers.

"Unfortunately, although some progress has been made, my 1935 complaint is equally applicable today to the majority of existing tests--and especially so for secure tests. ... Examples of secure tests are ACT, SAT and the LSAT."

In still another part of Buros' speech in Iowa he goes on to say: "Sixty years ago, there was great excitement about the potentialities of standard tests in the evaluation of students, teachers, and school systems. In 1917, Cubberly praised the testing movement. To paraphrase some of his remarks... 'To the teacher it can mean concise and definite statements as to what she is expected to do in the different subjects of the course of study.... For the superintendent it means the changing of school supervision from guesswork to scientific accuracy, and the establishment of standards of work by which he may defend what he is doing.' Within the next ten years, disillusionment set in."

Buros continues, "Now, today, despite the increasing criticism of testing by some, others are moving in the direction of similar unwarrantedly high expectations of sixty years ago. I refer to such movements as accountability, contract testing, and program evaluation." *

Let me pick up on the vagaries of accountability. Education is a serious enterprise. Its essence lies in what happens between children and their parents, teachers, and classmates. These relationships are delicate and susceptible to strong outside influences, and an accountability system must take care not to damage them. Above all, the system must be "livable" for those who are expected to abide by it.

In a pluralistic society an accountability system should promote diversity, not conformity. Opportunities for diversity must exist for the child, the parent, the teacher, the school, and the community. Each entity has a right to be itself. A monolithic system which imposes a single set of values strikes at the very heart of individualism and democratic processes. In short, an accountability system should be responsive to individual differences.

I know that teachers believe in high standards for their students. They also understand that for teachers to teach, for learning to take place, students must be evaluated. But we believe strongly that learning must be evaluated in a variety of ways.

Among some of the ways is a plan whereby a teacher can develop a composite picture of a student and his academic and personal growth by behavior such as interaction with others, motivational patterns, independent work habits, oral presentations by students, parent-teacher conferences, individual diagnostic tests, teacher-made tests, school letter grades, and most important, the development of criterion-referenced tests.

What's the role of the federal government? There is no role for the federal government in the testing industry except to provide the financial resources to change the state of the art. Buros has been encouraging his fellow workers in the industry for over 42 years without success.

I would suggest that his proposal and ones similar to what he advocates should be supported and encouraged by the federal government. His proposal provides for two types of tests: tests for assessing the performance of groups and tests for assessing the performance of individuals.

The group tests should be designed to measure the achievement of schools having common objectives and learning environments. Each test could be quite short, requiring very little time to administer. The time now required to administer an achievement battery, sometimes as much as seven hours, could be reduced to thirty minutes. The use of short group tests, each taken by only a fraction (say, one-

*Reprints of the Buros statement, "Fifty Years in Testing," are available from the NEA-IPD Information Center.

fifth) of the students, will greatly reduce the costs in terms of time and money. It would also allow a much wider range of objectives and curricular analyses to be covered.

The use of different tests for measuring groups and individuals would permit school systems to abandon national norms for individuals and to adapt commercially purchased tests and processing services to better meet local needs.

Purchased tests could be supplemented by locally prepared examinations and integrated into the testing program.

Local school systems would be free to adapt the tests in various ways to better meet their needs. Items could be dropped by not scoring and new items added in locally constructed tests. As a result, school systems would become more actively involved in the choice, study, adaptation, and supplementation of commercially purchased tests and processing services. Test authors and publishers would give local school systems assistance in formulating testing programs which are adapted to the local situation.

In addition to this recommended role for the federal government, I would recommend that the National Assessment of Educational Progress continue to be funded to insure that there is data for assessing program growth. It should not be hampered by a lack of funds.

Of course, basics are important; reading, writing, and arithmetizing are critical to the success of any academic experience. But by and large, cognitive learning is a by-product of training; and training is only one technique in the arsenal of teaching methods, not the only method.

There was a disturbing incident regarding standardized tests reported in the January 28 Washington Post. A principal in the Pocomoke, Maryland, school had given all his third-graders copies of the previous year's Iowa Basic Skills Test. Because the same test is used each year, the Pocomoke third-graders, according to the paper, had an unfair advantage and scored significantly higher--the principal had cheated the system. I believe he did cheat, but I also believe that standardized tests cannot help but lead to that mentality. The school district's superintendent inadvertently put the whole thing in its proper perspective. He said, "You ought to be able to guess what the scores will be by looking at the I.Q. scores and the education and income of the parents." In other words, we know where those kids are going to end up before we ever give the test. Then why do we give the test? And even worse, why do we publish the results? I suspect it's because our system demands winners and losers--and the winners have to know who the losers are so that they can feel good about winning, so that they'll know they're inherently better than someone else. Martin Luther King, Jr., put that all straight when he said discrimination does damage to both the discriminator and the one being discriminated against--it leads the discriminator into believing he's superior and leads the one being discriminated against into believing he's inferior. Both notions are wrong. The superintendent goes on to tell us in the article that there was no pressure placed on his building administrators to excel. That is such pure unmitigated nonsense. It angered me. That's tantamount to saying, because newspapers print NFL football scores and because Denver is 12-3, Dallas 13-2, Miami 10-4, that doesn't necessarily create pressure on Hank Stramn of the New Orleans Saints with a record of 3-11. I suppose we're to believe Hank was fired because the uniform inventory didn't check. That's nonsense. What we're really telling students and teachers and parents is, look folks, there'll always be losers, and the test of your worthiness is whether or not you and your kids finish above the median.

It is my personal conviction that the whole notion of norm-referenced standardized tests makes a lie of our often-stated concern for individual differences. It's the very thing which leads children to believe that they only have worth as measured against someone else and the most tragic aspect of our preoccupation with training as it relates to those tests is that most children are trained to try to be better than someone else, which more often cripples them than helps them. In my view, the only competition worth the name is competition with one's self. Teaching at its best is a helping function. Good teachers are good helpers. Evaluate children, help them overcome deficiencies, but help them do that by measuring them against the curriculum objectives of our schools, not some predetermined test based on a psychometrician's commitment to making a perfect curve at the expense of one-half of all the children who take it.

One could successfully argue that it was not the intention of the test maker to have national standardized tests measure or shape school curriculum. But the intention of the test writer is meaningless if in fact state legislatures and school boards start rewriting curriculum to conform to the content of SAT or any other national standardized test.

A free society needs above all things a free and a learned citizenry. The first task of education is to stimulate curiosity--to teach children how to learn and how to remain open. If we cannot do that then we cannot truly educate, we can only train--and the difference between training and educating is monumental. Educated people remain curious a lifetime, while one who is trained only performs rituals. Educated people change things, trained people accept them. Trained people are not creative, they're predictable. They're predictable because they can be counted on to repeat the responses they've been trained to repeat, no matter what the circumstances. And that's why a narrow educational response predicated on the "good old days" holds the greatest single threat to our republic--because a nation of trained people could not possibly be learned and flexible enough to meet the complex challenges that lie ahead for all of us.